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## Experiencing Reality Alive

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# 1. Experiencing reality alive: Bergson and Whitehead on engaged experience.

by Tina Röck

*To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.*

Emily Dickinson

In this chapter I will investigate a particular aspect of sense experience, which I call ‘engaged experience’. I will attempt to outline how a focus on *engaged experience* can help us to uncover fundamental features of the world given in everyday sense experience, that are often overlooked or disregarded. It is precisely the focus on *engaged experience* that helped two of the most prominent process thinkers of the 20th century, Alfred North Whitehead and Henri Bergson, to arrive at an understanding of reality as processual and dynamic, to conceive of reality as reality alive. In Bergson *engaged experience* is discussed as ‘intuition’ and in Whitehead, it is discussed as ‘causal efficacy’, i.e. what Whitehead calls feeling and sympathy.

In the first part of this chapter, I will use arguments provided by both thinkers to outline why objective science, traditional philosophy and common sense make it problematic to discover *engaged experience* and thus make it difficult to understand experience and its result adequately. I will then outline the idea of a philosophy of creativity that emerges from an emphasis of ‘engaged experience’. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to argue that only *engaged experience* can provide us with adequate access to what there is. Following Bergson and Whitehead, I will thus attempt to show *engaged experience* as the only medium able to disclose the world in its actual dynamic concreteness, as the only tool able to discover reality alive.

## Introduction: what is Experience

Before I can explain what the term ‘engaged experience’ refers to and how it differs from other ways of understanding sense experience, I first need to clarify my use of the term ‘experience’. A daunting task since I agree with Whitehead when he claims that ‘experience’ is “one of the most deceitful [terms] in philosophy” (Whitehead, 1927, p.16). At the same time, it is truly worthwhile to get involved with this topic, since experience is fundamental to life - there would be no life – as we know it - without experience. Any practical as well as theoretical understanding of how we can engage and interact - in digital as well as real worlds - presupposes an understanding of experience. Experience is the basis for all our interactions with the world, our integration in the world and understanding of the world.

However, before I move on to explain how I use the term, I first want to address the question why this issue so thorny. Let me just quickly discuss two issues, that I would consider the most problematic ones. The investigation of experience is complicated by the fact that there is no position outside of experience from which we could investigate experience objectively, we always already are experiencing beings. Any investigation of experience is thus already fully immersed in and influenced by what it attempts to investigate. To make matters worse, insofar as we as experiencing subjects are part of this objective world, this radically subjective experience does not only grant us knowledge of the (objective) world, it is also an ontological, an actual, part of this reality. The experiences that we as experiencing beings are having are themselves part of the world, thus experience is at the same time purely subjective givenness as well as objectively present in the world.

My use of the term ‘experience’ in this paper is easily accounted for. I will use the term ‘experience’<sup>1</sup> in a maximally open manner, namely to refer to the immediate perception of goings on, in contrast to knowledge which I take to be the result of conceptual associations and interpretations as well as reflections on experience. To me, there is thus a distinction to be made between experience and knowledge, even if much (or all) knowledge stems from experience and is thus related to experience in some specific way. Thus far I am not diverging much from a traditional empiricist understanding of sense experience as it can be found in the traditional reading of Locke’s essays for example. So the difference between an empiricist understanding of experience and my understanding of *engaged experience* is not immediately evident, but becomes visible only after a closer look. So in the following paragraphs, I will highlight in what respects scientific empiricism, and traditional philosophical ways of understanding experience fall short of *engaged experience*, and thus the subsequent paragraphs will provide a sort of negative definition of what *engaged experience* is before I move on to discuss the nature of *engaged experience* proper.

## Disclosing *engaged experience* ...by going beyond science

As is well known, Locke is generally taken to claim that all knowledge stems from experience, be it experience as sensation of outer phenomena or experience as reflection on inner phenomena (and their combination)<sup>2</sup>. Much of modern philosophy and contemporary science is guided by the resulting traditional empiricist understanding of experience. An understanding that, I would claim, is relatively one-sided both in regards to Locke’s actual statements<sup>3</sup> and in regards to its treatment of the phenomenon of experience itself. Still, many contemporary philosophers seem to agree – the scientific method is the best, for some even the only adequate method, to account for the structure of our experiences and to learn something from experience about the natural world surrounding us. The two most influential thinkers of dynamic reality, Bergson and Whitehead, however, while having great respect for the scientific method, still contended that there is a role that philosophy can play in discovering and understanding experience as well as nature. They agree that there is something to reality that the scientific method just cannot adequately account for and that we can access it through *engaged experience*.

So why precisely does science fall short when it comes to accessing and understanding what there is? One reason for this shortfall, which both Bergson and Whitehead agree on, is the necessary amount of abstraction involved in empirical and scientific investigations. Science cannot begin with what is given in experience as it is given, as reality is too complex and too dynamic to allow for a rigorous treatment. Only after the objects of investigation have been selected, adequately isolated and thus prepared for experimental investigation can true scientific

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows I will restrict my investigation to sense experience since I am interested in how *engaged experience* uncovers reality and not in how it could potentially uncover thoughts, dreams or other kinds of inner experiences.

<sup>2</sup> According to Locke the sensations “convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them.” (Locke Essay I, 1 § 3) The “other foundation from which experience furnishes the understanding with ideas is the perception of the operations of our minds within us...” (§ 4).

<sup>3</sup> There are of course conversations to be had about the nature of this distinction between sensations and reflections in Locke. I am however mainly interested in the way his ideas shaped the discourse and less in uncovering Locke’s actual claims and will thus forgo these reflections.

examination begin. While the immense usefulness of the sciences depends on a certain degree of abstraction, it is the resulting pervasive use of abstractions in knowledge attained through this method, which leads to what Whitehead discusses as the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*. This fallacy consists in the idea that the abstract entities or laws described and used in the sciences - things like atoms, gravity or black holes - are not considered to be mere models, but instead are considered *more real* or at least *more fundamental* than the world of our experience. Whitehead argues against this fallacy, that the concrete world we experience is *at least* as real. Gravity, atoms and electromagnetism are, for instance, hugely useful and successful concepts or models, but they are not more real (or more fundamental, or even more objective) than the warmth of the sun that I can feel on my skin or the taste of an apple. Why is that? Because it always is our body that first engages, that first feels or experiences the effects we attribute to gravity, that encounters the effects that we explain by positing a law or a force. Even the most abstract scientific concept is necessarily based on and abstracted from the *engaged experiences* we have. If we had no experience of the effects of 'gravity', there simply would be no need for such a concept. We can further argue with Whitehead that in concrete *engaged experience* there is no absolute difference between the effects of gravity on our body and other experiences or feelings; these experiences vary only in degree, but not in kind. So, Whitehead contends, it makes no sense to accord gravity in its abstracted form a central status within physics while at the same time disregarding all other *engaged experiences* (or 'feelings' in Whitehead's terminology). As Whitehead puts it, the "sharp division between mentality and nature has no ground in our fundamental observation. We find ourselves living within nature" (Whitehead, 1966, p.156). So, *engaged experience* involves engagement with all that is experienced in its full concreteness, i.e. with as little abstraction or simplification as possible. So, it is the task of philosophy to engage with the sciences and to continually check the *necessary* abstractions made within the sciences against *any form of engaged experience*, be it sensory, aesthetic, artistic or even spiritual, in order to test the adequacy of the scientific abstractions in describing what there is.

The disregard of feelings and the correlated bifurcation of nature, the simplification and abstraction at the heart of the scientific method, is however not problematic for scientific progress itself. Scientists most often do not engage in an endless open quest of knowing the world we live in. On the contrary, in scientific practice these overly broad and general questions are usually displaced by much more specific scientific curiosity. The scientific endeavour might aim for a way to maximise efficiency, to produce a maximum of usefulness or at least potential usefulness and practical results. Science generally searches for answers for highly specific questions, at most it investigates ways to generate knowledge of principles or of causal connections. Such practical or informative results are much more easily obtained if the seemingly irrelevant pieces of information are disregarded; if we do not account for all of experience, and instead focus on what appears relevant for the specific question at hand. This focus on a specific result, on an outcome and thus the focus on creating useful or at least potentially useful knowledge, should dissolve any doubt as to why these practical and scientific strategies do not disclose reality as it really is - this is just not the aim of these modes of investigation. The nature of reality is just not an issue investigated by most scientists nor is this question at the heart of many experiments. More often than not it is the philosophers that engage with specific scientific results and apply these to reality in general to construct a grand theory.

The same critique of employing overly general concepts and ideas when it comes to understanding the concrete world we live in, can thus also be levelled against many philosophers and philosophies.

## Disclosing *engaged experience*

### ...by going beyond traditional philosophy and common sense

Whitehead's critique of the abstraction involved in adequately employing the scientific method also has implications for his understanding of the aim and nature of philosophy. Not every kind of philosophy, is able to begin with *engaged experience*, and thus able to disclose dynamic reality. Any philosophy that departs from, or presupposes a high level of abstraction will fall prey to a similar fallacy of misplaced concreteness as was diagnosed in the positive sciences. But this does not only apply to the philosophies that depart from scientific results, without reflecting on the presuppositions and abstractions involved in the scientific process, but to most of western theoretical philosophy. Whereas much of science is at least aware of its fallibility, and thus keeps searching for insights into the adequacy of their predictive models, or continuously looking for useful materials or helpful laws that can describe or predict certain phenomena better, most of the post-platonic philosophy has searched for absolute and eternal truths, indubitable fundamentals or even the origins of intelligibility. Furthermore, in a more practical context, most philosophers were also not interested in understanding the world as it is. Most of the time philosophers will strive for insight into the good life or the best government, the logical structure of reality or any of the other theoretical aims mentioned before. Not many thinkers were ultimately interested in merely understanding what there is, as it is. On the contrary, throughout most of western philosophy the world has generally been considered a copy or illusion and it was the aim of the philosopher to uncover true reality behind the changing appearances.

So if in any philosophy "things first have to be removed from the factual life-world in which they primarily appear as significant" (Westerlund, 2010, p.40) in order to render them appropriate objects for philosophical investigation, then this detachment results in a theoretical position in which the philosopher is left with "scattered remnants from the breakdown of a world, [...]" which are "possible building blocks for the construction of a new [world]" (Heidegger, 1992, p.121 my translation). This type of philosophy, a philosophy that breaks the integrated world we live in into distinct parts, in order to generate re-combinable pieces and parts, makes the same kinds of presuppositions as a science that breaks the world into analysable and re-combinable components or elements. This kind of philosophy, while it might be immensely useful for some research interests, loses any relevance when it comes to criticising or balancing the necessary abstractions and idealisations of the natural sciences, nor can it disclose the dynamic changing reality we live in from within its integrated complexity.

Just like Whitehead, Bergson too was convinced that many factors hinder our philosophical investigations into experience and the nature of the objects of experience. He talks about a "veil of prejudices" preventing insight; some of these prejudices are "artificial, created by philosophical speculation, the others natural to common sense." (Bergson, 2002, p. 131) One example for such an artificial prejudice is the longstanding philosophical conviction that there can be no knowledge of that which is truly dynamic. Even though western philosophy first began with investigations into experiences and the sensible, from water to the elements, this changed with Parmenides' arguments that ultimately dismissed the relevance of the changing and living reality that we perceive through the senses. This question of the (in)adequacy of perception as well as judgement and knowledge vis-à-vis a living and changing object of investigation has plagued Western philosophy ever since. However, instead of engaging and coming to terms with these issues, philosophical investigation mostly turned to the ideal, the super-sensible, to *true* reality as an object of investigation and knowledge, precisely because concrete and dynamic reality appeared as an impossible object for knowledge. Ultimately

philosophy thus substituted the perception of what there is as the guide for philosophical investigation for the abstract, the concept, the ideal.

This is the dilemma we somehow seem to be still facing. Do we try to investigate changing reality as it is and thus give up hope in ever achieving absolute knowledge? Or, do we abstract, catalogue and categorise in such a way as to fashion a reasonably adequate and often very useful reconstruction of reality that we can actually know? It is no wonder most philosophers choose the latter option. The problem with this path is, however, that what we get to know is not actually fully reflective of what there is. Only if we manage to put aside the resulting “artificial schema we interpose unknowingly between reality and us” (Bergson, 2002, p. 142) will we be able to actually discover and disclose the creativity of changing reality. However, in order to see, to perceive and experience in this way, philosophical thought has to detach from trying to achieve some objective goal – be it political action or objective knowledge, it has to let go of its obsession with practical outcomes and results, instead investigating this practical and engaged involvement with the world itself. This break with the world is, however, not to be understood as the Platonic attempt to transport “oneself immediately into a world different from the one we inhabit, in developing other faculties of perception than the senses and consciousness” (Bergson, 2002, p. 139). Bergson’s suggested break from practical life does not mean turning one’s back upon it (Bergson, 2002, p. 140), it instead implies a break from the necessities and restrictions of practical life in order to free oneself to see what there is given in experience – within practical life. Only such useless and aimless experience can be engaged and disclose the dynamic nature of reality and only it allows us to grasp change and duration in its original mobility.<sup>4</sup>

After these somewhat negative accounts of why experience is often not *engaged experience*, I will now move on and attempt to give a positive characterisation of *engaged experience*.

## Moving from empiricism to *engaged experience*.

Within the empirical tradition, experience is often understood as some form of registration of data through the senses, that ends in a representation (broadly construed) of an outer event to the inner eye. From this point of view, sense experience is fundamentally a form of representation. The problem with this understanding and treatment of experience is firstly that it tends to frame experience in terms of a sum of distinct sense data and secondly that tends to presuppose a substantial distinction between inner and outer experience, disregarding all the levels of connection and interaction that experience involves. In what follows I will try to point out several of these complexities using certain of Edmund Husserl’s arguments. Husserl does not only provide an excellent account of the levels of interaction that constitute actual experience, but he also begins with a helpful account of what experience discloses for us. Husserl argues that if we investigate experience closely, we see that we are never merely given a set of sense data, quite to the contrary. First and foremost, we experience an object in sense perception. Only in further investigation can we analyse it and distinguish various sense data, qualia or primary and secondary qualities from other components of the experience. So, to begin one’s investigation of experience and its contents with qualia or sense data means to have already lost what is given in actual experience, is to have already lost experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Intuitions can also not be identified with instinct because, according to Bergson, instinct is a form of knowledge geared towards practical and useful engagement with the material world, just like the intellect is. They are both not disinterested ways of engaging with what there is as it is. Both instinct and intellect are geared towards practical goals and not towards attaining knowledge about the nature of reality. The only difference between intellect and instinct is that, while intellect represents this form of interested and practical knowledge, instinct enacts it.

Husserl argues further that the object that we experience is never given in isolation, it always appears in a concrete context, it has a background (whether I focus on it or not) and appears to the perceiver from a perspective in space against this background. This relation of foreground and background is furthermore correlated to my corporeal movements. If I see an apple, for example, I can walk toward it. If I do so, I expect it to become larger in my visual field. If this is not the case, then I know that I am not having a sense experience. I might be dreaming or hallucinating, but I am definitely not having a sensory perception of the apple, if the apple does not change in correspondence with my movements. In this short account of a very ordinary case of experience, we already see how integral our bodily movements are in assessing experiences. Any change in the placement of my head, the focus of my eyes or the position of my body changes the perception of the given object, if the object is given in actual sense experience. There is a specific way that the changes in my movements have to correlate to the object. Husserl calls these movements and orientations of one's body that correlate to changes in the perceived objects 'Kinaesthesen'.<sup>5</sup>

Coming back to my example of the apple, I might mistake a very realistic image for a real apple, but this mistake will become clear as soon as I try to engage further with the apple. If for example, I try to grasp or eat it. It is worth noting at this point that it is precisely the expectation that I can eat the apple that motivates me to move toward the apple and to attempt to bite into it. Husserl refers to this primitive form of expectation that colours all our sensory experience 'protention'. Only thanks to this expectation can we even be surprised by the fact that it is not an apple that I am experiencing but an image. We can only be surprised by experiences that *do not conform* to these expectations. So, only if there is a connection between past expectation and current experience, only if my past expectation is somehow present in the current failure to grasp the apple will I be surprised. Husserl calls this continuation of the past into the present 'retention'. So, for Husserl, even the most mundane experience is a complex interaction, which involves expectations, retention and the movement of one's body as part of any sense experience.<sup>6</sup>

Actual experience thus involves much more than merely noticing, registering and representing of data. It involves, for example, temporal extension, interaction and disclosure through corporeal engagement, as described above. This already shows how limited our common sense understanding of experience is.

If we furthermore also acknowledge that experience is in the world, insofar as we as experiencing subjects are part of this objective world, then experience is also more than a merely epistemological problem. It is furthermore also an ontological problem.<sup>7</sup> This understanding of experience as an objective and ontological part of the world undercuts the traditional epistemological distinctions between purely subjective experience and objective data and renders experience an interactive and subjective-objective form of engagement.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Matter and Memory* (published 1896) Bergson discusses similar ideas introducing his ontology of 'images' as a way to sidestep the opposition between 'representation' and 'thing in itself' in traditional ontologies. In this conception, the orientation of the body and its role in the constitution of perception is just as central as it is in Husserl's thought.

<sup>6</sup> In this case too Bergson does discuss similar issues. However, he does so, not regarding perception, but in regards to ontological and metaphysical questions, namely in regards to temporality, change and presence. Bergson too argues that the past is retained and is indivisible from the present, he is, however, more interested in the "automatic" (Bergson, 2002, p. 153) and (Bergson, 1922, p. 5) and absolute preservation of the past in every present and the resulting "undivided" and durational "present". (Bergson, 2002, p. 152)

<sup>7</sup> The interest in the ontological implications of experience that characterise both Bergson's and Whitehead's approach also distinguish them fundamentally from Husserl's conception of phenomenology, mainly because Husserl took pains to exclude ontological questions from his phenomenological investigations as much as possible.



## Two forms of engagement - epistemological and ontological:

*Engaged experience*, I would thus claim, is engaged in two ways. First, it is engaged in actively uncovering as best possible all sorts of common preconceptions that guide our common-sense understanding and use of sense experience. This engagement is situated on the level of epistemology and is focused on preventing misinterpretations of what experience is and misinterpretations of what experiences can and do uncover. Its aim is to free actual experience from the conceptual frameworks that make it so tricky to see what is given instead of seeing what we think we see (e.g. sense data vs objects).

So, on the one hand, *engaged experience* is engaged in an attempt to provide this kind of clarification and in this sense *engaged experience* has a lot in common with the project of phenomenology. There is, however, a fundamental contradiction inherent to this approach. Namely the fact that we always already are experiencing beings. There is no outside of experience from which we could examine, probe and investigate experience 'objectively'. So, *engaged experience* can only happen haphazardly, while we experience, in the course of experiencing and cannot be considered a preparatory step to be taken before experience begins - there is no *before experience for the experiencing beings that we are*. We need to learn to see while we are engaged in seeing, we can only uncover *engaged experience* while we are experiencing.

This aspect of engagement is a matter of degree and we will never be entirely rid of conceptual frameworks and preconceptions, but it is worth trying to be as free of them as possible in order to minimise conceptual distortions. This puts us in the seemingly contradictory position of having to work at developing an adequate practice of experience before we can experience adequately. Experience itself is not naturally accessible to us in its most adequate form, nor do we have immediate access to its most adequate definition.

*Engaged experience* is however also engaged in a second, ontological sense. It describes an experience that is directly engaged with what is experienced. *Engaged experience* is thus conceived as a form of direct and immediate access to what there is. In Whitehead and Bergson this takes the form of entering into or assimilating the ontological object through sympathy.

This direct grasping becomes possible, firstly, because of what we have described as the first sense of *engaged experience*. Namely the pushing away of the layers covering and distorting experiences. Secondly, such direct access is possible because on an ontological level we as experiencing beings are part of this world, just like our experience is part of this world. There is no absolute ontological difference between the experiencer and what is experienced. For Bergson, we share in the duration characterising all of reality. It is this connection that emerges into evidence in intuition as *engaged experience*. According to Whitehead, all of reality is composed of actual occasions, the most fundamental aspects of reality. These actual occasions are characterised by and through their experience. To put it simply and without addressing the conceptual intricacies of either ontological system, both thinkers do not conceive of experience as something merely epistemological, but also see it as an ontological factor. Experience has ontological implications. Moreover, both thinkers also agree that experience is not to be understood as a purely human faculty and that it thus is not necessarily related to a human subject.



In sum, two things can be said about *engaged experience*. First that it engages in minimising subjective distortions and conceptual structuring of what is experienced and tries to allow for the world to actively structure the event of *engaged experience*. And secondly, this direct structuring of the subject/mind/perception by the world is possible because we as experiencing beings are always already intimately related to the world and integrated into the world on an ontological level. What led to our misunderstanding of experience is the idea of an ontologically wholly separated mind that was supposed to disclose an independent world it had no direct access to.<sup>8</sup>

## Events of engaged experience

### Bergson's intuition

Bergson's 'intuition' describes an event of *engaged experience* whose aim is not (unmitigated) insight into eternal truths, but a direct grasping of concrete singularity – a grasping of what there is, in its duration. Every intuition is a simple and indivisible event of experience, allowing us to grasp, experience or 'live' an object from within. An event that provides access to and knowledge of the object as a whole. To say it in the words of Bergson: "We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it." (Bergson, 2002, p. 161). Intuition, *la vision directe*, is thus a form of immediate consciousness, a direct seeing, that is almost identical to the object seen. So, since intuition aims at entering into the concrete singular and does not aim for absolute knowledge of the abstract or general, Bergson's understanding of intuition is a form of *engaged experience* and not a form of mere abstract speculation. Intuition, as Bergson understands it, engages with the world we experience – the world we live in. Moreover, only our intuition can help us to place ourselves within duration to overcome the obstacles our education, our common sense and our intellect pose in achieving true knowledge: "[...] if one places oneself directly, by an effort of intuition, in the concrete flowing of duration" then "the intuition of our duration [...] puts us in contact with a whole continuity of durations which we should try to follow either downwardly or upwardly [...]" (Bergson, 2002, p. 187). For Bergson, every event of intuition is thus a direct experience, and at the same time, it is an active acknowledgement of our fundamental ontological relatedness to and with the world. Only through this single and undivided event of direct experience can we grasp a single and concrete being in its uniqueness, in its duration.

At this point, it is important to emphasise that intuition, as Bergson understands it, is not a simple prejudice or conviction. An intuition is not the mental state I have if I believe that a proposition is true. Also, intuition is not the opposite of rationality or reflection. Just like Plato considered discursive activities useful and necessary to remember and thus gain access to the true essence of reality, Bergson would insist that we have to engage rationally with the world. We need to investigate what there is before we can experience intuitions. Just as one usually has to turn a complex problem over in one's mind again and again before understanding can ensue, we have to investigate the world thoroughly before we can see its durational character. So, even

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<sup>8</sup> At this point, I want to clarify that the idea of 'engaged experience' does not stand in conflict or competition to more traditional ways of understanding experience as registration and representation. I would like to emphasise further that it is just not the case, that every experience should always only be engaged experience, or, that we should always focus on the engaged elements of experience. On the contrary, *engaged experience* is either only a rare event (as in Bergson) or the basis of all experiences, that is only however not very helpful without the other levels of experience more familiar to us (as in Whitehead). Let me repeat this. *Engaged experience* is not helpful at all in answering most scientific questions or most of the practical questions we are confronted with every day.

though intuition is an event of immediate experience, it is not an instantaneous event of experience that is immediately or always available to us.

One might now of course wonder what Bergson means when he says that we should enter into the object. It just seems so apparent to us that the tree is out there and my experience of it is in me. How could I ever grasp the tree as a whole and access its durational nature from within as Bergson seems to claim? Granted, we tend to think, that my experience of the tree relates to the actual tree in some form - it is either an image of the tree, or a synthesis of the data provided by the tree or similar, but how would that give me direct access to the tree - help me enter into it?

In this case too Husserl can provide us with a limited but possibly helpful way to look at this issue on the level of epistemology. From his earliest writings in the *Logical Investigations* onward Husserl always argued that it is illusory to think that what we have access to in experience are mere copies, only images or appearances. He calls this common sense (mis)understanding of experience, namely that experience means to have an image or copy of the world in my mind, the 'Bildtheorie' (image theory) of cognition. Even though this 'Bildtheorie' has been quite pervasive throughout the history of philosophy, according to Husserl, it does not adequately describe actual experience.

When we take care to investigate how we experience the world and compare this to the experience of an image, the difference between these kinds of experiences is striking. There is a substantial difference separating the experience of an actual cake, for example, from the perception of the image of a cake. This difference is so pronounced that only rarely are we even able to confuse the two experiences. Again, under certain circumstances, we might be tricked, but given enough time to investigate we will realise our mistake. Husserl argues that whatever is given in experience as real (*reell gegeben*) is given in a specific 'fleshy manner' (*Leibhaft*) and this manner of givenness differs quite substantially from what is given as an image or appearance (Husserl, 1997, pp. 19, §8). Husserl thus feels quite confident in concluding that experience that provides us with reality in a 'fleshy' (*Leibhaft*) manner does not merely grant an image of reality, but discloses the phenomenon itself, and I would add, provides accesses to what there is.<sup>9</sup>

Husserl, of course, gives quite a few further and more detailed arguments to support his conclusion that experience gives as real and does not merely provide a copy or an image, but I hope that this argument will suffice to render the idea of access and direct givenness tenable at

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<sup>9</sup> Not being interested in ontological questions Husserl has to remain agnostic as to what it means if something is given as real in a fleshy manner - many phenomenological fights have been fought in an attempt to decide this issue. I would go so far as to claim that it is fair to say that giving as real does imply access to reality in itself, with the caveat that all we can know about reality is *how* it is given and we cannot deduce *what* it is. We furthermore cannot know anything about it with certainty, since, as I have shown above, it is always possible that further experiences disclose mistakes we made in our assessments of what experience seems to disclose. So, all there is to be said for what is given as real is that it is given as real and that we might be mistaken about that. Rather unhelpful, but in my eyes nonetheless a position that tends towards realism. In *Ideas I* Husserl does discuss a thought experiment investigating what would happen to experiencing consciousness if the world was destroyed, and claiming that the existence of consciousness would not be affected by the destruction of the world (even though the experiences themselves would be substantially modified). (Husserl, 2012, pp. 92, §48) Many use this argument to claim a priority of mind over its correlate and argue that Husserl was an idealist. For some different opinions see: (De Palma, 2015) as well as (De Palma, 2017) Husserl does argue in later notes, that it is impossible to imagine the World (as a whole) as not being: "*Es ist, genau überlegt, für das Ich, das in dieser Weise Weltbewusstsein hat, schlechthin unmöglich, sich die Welt als nichtseiend vorzustellen, während es das für jedes einzelne Seiende (nur sein eigenes Sein, als menschliches Subjekt ausgenommen) prinzipiell tun kann. Das Nichtsein der Welt ist nur hypothetisch ansetzbar, so wie ein Widersinniges doch als seiend ansetzbar ist.*" (Husserl, 2008, p. 256)

this point, at least on an epistemic level. If we add to this the idea shared by Bergson and Whitehead that experience is also an ontological reality, then Bergson's account of intuition might seem less far-fetched than it did a couple of paragraphs ago.

To see beyond the veil of prejudices and to develop an actual form of *engaged experience*, Bergson proposes the same solution that Whitehead suggests, namely to plunge deeper into experience – to enter in *engaged experience* - instead of trying to rise above it through abstraction. The ultimate aim of such an entering into *engaged experience* would be to deepen and widen our experience so that ideally nothing our senses show us has to be eliminated or disregarded, so that nothing has to be abstracted from.

## *Engaged experience as a fundamental feature of all experiences* - Whitehead's causal efficacy

Experience is fundamental to Whitehead's cosmology of organism. To him, no experiential datum is insignificant, no moment of experience can be safely disregarded. Moreover, he also claims that there is nothing in the world that does not engage in experience (very broadly construed). While these claims might seem somewhat overly general and disconcerting, it is essential to keep in mind that Whitehead's understanding of experience is very broad and that there are various layers of experience that can be distinguished. Everything that exists shares in the lowest level of experience, namely *causal efficacy or feeling*. This most basic form of experience does not presuppose consciousness. Fundamentally, for Whitehead, experience in its most basic form includes any interaction that affects the processes that are involved. Thus, it seems adequate to claim that for Whitehead even causation is a form of, albeit elementary, experience. The stone hitting the earth is affected by this impact just as the patch of grass is affected (to a different degree) by the stone that hits it. In this event both the stone and the earth 'feel' each other. This *experiential togetherness* (Whitehead, 1978, pp. 189, 288ff) (Whitehead also uses the term *prehension*)<sup>10</sup> is Whitehead's account of the always already present interconnectedness of all that there is in feeling or experience. What modern science calls 'causation' is merely derived and abstracted from this form of experience. It grasps this feeling, however, in a very generalised and abstracted form and is thus an example of what Whitehead calls *concepts that are abstracted from their experiential meaning*.

As already discussed, this comprehensive understanding of experience rests on the most fundamental level of experience namely 'causal efficacy'. Causal efficacy too is a form of immediate experience. However, for Whitehead, what it can disclose is some form of bodily affection or bodily feeling and not the object or the whole - as intuition does for Bergson. This bodily feeling is an expression of *experiential togetherness* and connects the experiencing process with what is perceived. Causal efficacy relates the experiencer to what it experiences, it is fundamentally relational. The next higher level of experience that Whitehead discusses is 'presentational immediacy'. According to Whitehead, in contrast to causal efficacy, what is given on this level appears to be immediately present, without a trace of its source or becoming. Finally, we arrive at the third level, where we find what is generally referred to as sense experience or perception (Whitehead calls it 'symbolic reference'). In symbolic reference the two lower levels of experience are interwoven, so that what is experienced in one of the primary forms of experience (usually presentational immediacy) is used to interpret what is given through the other primary form of experience (usually causal efficacy). So according to

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the relation between a scientific description of causation and experiential togetherness, see (King, 1949, pp. 96-99).

Whitehead in perception we tend to use presentational immediacy to interpret feelings. The round yellow shape that is immediately given to me in presentational immediacy can thus, for example, be used to make sense or interpret the experience of warmth on my skin and brightness in my eyes that I am feeling in the mode of causal efficacy.

With the term 'causal efficacy' Whitehead thus refers to those aspects in experience, which disclose a feeling conformally in and with another, a state that Whitehead also characterises 'sympathy' - a description that is very similar to Bergson's account of intuition:

The primitive form of physical experience is emotional - blind emotion - received as felt elsewhere in another occasion and conformally appropriated as a subjective passion. In the language appropriate to the higher stages of experience, the primitive element is sympathy, that is, feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another (Whitehead, 1978, p. 162).

Just like intuition allows us, as an indivisible event of experience, to enter into the object and to grasp it from within, causal efficacy allows us to feel and appropriate as subjective another actual occasion through sympathy. And both forms of *engaged experience* allow us to access the dynamic reality of nature, reality alive immediately. However, while Bergson's *engaged experience* as intuition describes an event that might be quite rare, Whitehead's causal efficacy is the basis of any event of experience, even if we rarely account for it or experience it explicitly.

A further divergence between Bergson and Whitehead that comes into focus is in their respective descriptions of the status of feelings. For Whitehead feelings and blind emotions constitute the bedrock of *sympathy* as *causal efficiency*. Whitehead thus does not need to ask us to choose between feeling and intelligence. Instead, he considers feeling to be the most

basic form of experience and thus the most rudimentary form of intelligibility (Whitehead, 1978, p. 162). Bergson, on the other hand, does not associate feelings with intuitions, to him feelings are untrustworthy. They come and go too easily to provide a basis for true knowledge. However, when Bergson talks about feelings, he does mean emotions, whereas Whitehead sees feeling as a basic form of experience. Furthermore, their difference in assessing the role of feelings can also be associated with a difference in what they think can be attained through causal efficacy and intuition respectively.

While for Whitehead causal efficacy and sympathy can help us in discerning the arising of experience from the murky bottom of feeling up to presentational immediacy, proceeding in a quasi-Aristotelian fashion, Bergson, in this case taking the role of a Platonist, considers 'intuition' to be the moment the experience can provide access to pure duration. Thus, intuition refers to the moment when sympathy has become insight while causal efficacy describes the bedrock level of any experience. Intuition is an event; causal efficacy is present in any and every experience. To me these views are not irreconcilable, they merely focus on different levels of *engaged experience*. I would claim that it is the fundamental togetherness that Whitehead describes and clarifies, that makes the intuition Bergson focuses on possible.

Many readers have misinterpreted both Whitehead's terminology of 'sympathy' and 'feeling' as well as Bergson's terminology of 'intuition'. These insights into how we can gain adequate knowledge of what there is, have often been considered as being in contrast with logical thought, intellect and reason. Whitehead's terminology of 'feeling' and 'sympathy' have conjured the images of a romantic opposition of emotion and thought and of emphasising feelings at the expense of hard facts. However, neither Bergson nor Whitehead considered this oppositional understanding of their projects to be adequate. Bergson for example states quite explicitly that "a Schelling, a Schopenhauer and others [...] have more or less set up intuition in opposition to intelligence, one might think that I was using the same method. But of course, their intuition was an immediate search for the eternal!" (Bergson, 2002, p. 30). He considered intuition to provide the fundamental insights, the axioms that intellect could take apart and reassemble in its analysis. Whitehead, on the other hand, did not ask his readers to choose between feeling and intelligence. Instead, he considered feeling as the most basic form of experience and thus the most rudimentary form of intelligibility (Whitehead, 1978, p. 162). It is the basis from which intellect can and should grow and not its opponent.

## Conclusion

While *engaged experience* might help us to uncover the nature of reality alive, both thinkers emphasise that there is a price to pay for *engaged experience*, namely less focus on attaining practical or useful knowledge. Both Whitehead's and Bergson's approaches are entirely useless in guiding practical action, in answering specific questions or in answering the kinds of questions that are investigated in the empirical sciences. What such approaches can, however, provide is a reframing of how we think about the world. In doing philosophy, it might be quite inadequate to ask what *we can do with philosophy*, i.e. what uses it has and how we can convince others of our precise understanding of its specific usefulness. Instead, we might be better served if we asked *what philosophy can do with us*:

It is entirely correct and completely in order to say, 'You can't do anything with philosophy.' The only mistake is to believe that with this, the judgment concerning philosophy is at an end. For a little epilogue arises in the form of a counterquestion:

even if we can't do anything with it, may not philosophy in the end do something with us, provided that we engage ourselves with it? (Heidegger, 2000, p. 13)

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